

“Part-time work in the auto plants is modern day slavery”

Six weeks since the tragic death of US autoworker Jacoby Hennings

Jerry White

4 December 2017

Friday, December 1, marked six weeks since the tragic death of Jacoby Hennings, the 21-year-old temporary part-time worker at Ford’s Woodhaven Stamping plant just outside of Detroit. According to police and United Auto Workers (UAW) officials, the young man took his life as heavily armed police confronted him in the plant on the morning of October 20, shortly after union officials said Hennings waved a gun at them inside the UAW office in the factory.

The exact circumstances of the confrontation inside the UAW office and the shooting still remain shrouded in secrecy. Initial reports indicated a supervisor told the young man to go to speak with UAW Local 387 officers after he was disciplined or terminated for coming in late. The UAW has not released any details of the discussion, which reportedly lasted over an hour, between Hennings and Local UAW 387 officials Arnold Miller, Christopher Pfaff and Bill Jablonski.

While the *World Socialist Web Site* was able to obtain a copy of the Woodhaven police report through a Freedom of Information request, the police have rejected a request by the WSWS to see the witness statements of the three union officials, along with Ford Human Resource Manager Martin Hernandez.

Even more suspicious is the fact that the Wayne County Medical Examiner’s office, which immediately declared that the young man died from a self-inflicted wound, has still not released its autopsy report and ballistics information. A spokeswoman for the county office informed the WSWS that the autopsy has already been done, but the report by Medical Examiner Dr. Carl Schmidt has not been completed.

What is known is that Jacoby, who was affectionately known as Coby by family and friends, was under intense pressure at work, like thousands of other temporary part-time employees (TPTs) in the auto industry. TPTs have no job security and although they pay union dues and initiation fees—totaling \$90 from their first paycheck—the UAW treats these workers as pariahs, telling TPTs the union will do nothing to protect them against dismissal even for the slightest infraction. Four “occurrences,” including late arrival, absence, or even showing up for work on a day you are not assigned, results in immediate

firing.

Coby, whose parents and many uncles and aunts are long-time Chrysler workers, did not hold down just one TPT job, but two. He also worked at Fiat Chrysler’s Warren Truck Assembly Plant, 37 miles away. Coworkers there said he was hard-working, yet looked exhausted and was worried he might lose his job when FCA moves production of the Ram pickup truck to another plant next year. Woodhaven Ford workers who worked with Coby told the same story, with one long-time worker telling the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, “He was a good worker but he was quiet. I heard he came from a good family.”

“He worked two jobs, at 21, hoping to follow in his parents’ footsteps and get hired in,” a worker from Detroit who has followed the case told the WSWS. “They take these kids and do them this way. In their minds, they are thinking, ‘This is one of the Big Three, I’m going to get hired in. I’m going to get full benefits, and I have somewhere I can retire from.’ Because all you hear is Chrysler, Ford and GM. And you’re not realizing, this is never going to happen. This is modern-day slavery and these people are using you.”

“How do you take union dues from a young man or a young woman and you can’t help them. The whole premise of them paying union dues is that if anything happens they can come to you for help. We still don’t have any picture of what really happened. After the first day you didn’t hear anything else on TV, it just disappeared. If an autopsy is complete, why hasn’t it been released yet? How did he go to work and one hour later he is dead?”

“I never thought about this until I started talking to the WSWS, what these people are going through. I knew that temporary agencies can use you and throw you out the door. But I never knew it was this bad, not just with Coby, but everyone. Companies are making all this money off of these people and they don’t even want to insure them. You tell them that their work is worth half of what the man right next to them is doing. Who wouldn’t get upset when some guy is doing the same job and they are making twice as much? It’s modern-day slave labor and it doesn’t matter what color you are. I just hope

that somehow or another things can change with the way they are treating people.”

A retired GM worker added, “I couldn’t imagine what this family lost. This is a parents’ nightmare. When we were kids you really dream of getting that job, and when you got it you were proud of it. Things like what happened to Coby were never really heard of. Thirty years later that same job is like going to work at your local supermarket. The way the system works for TPTs is cruel. If someone lost their life in the workplace, that tells you something about that place.

“I can tell you after being in five plants in five different states, I have seen more garbage than you can ever imagine. The UAW today is a disgrace. The really union guys way back in the day that fought and died for the stuff that these guys have given away for money over the last 20 years, if they were alive today they would probably shoot them on the street. These guys are just thieves.

“The reason why the UAW Local 387 guys haven’t said anything is because they have a gag order on them, to protect the financial interests not just of the company but the union themselves. The union is worth near a billion dollars—they didn’t get that by representing people, that’s for damn sure. My heart goes out to Jacoby and his family. I know that even legacy (higher seniority) employees are treated like Coby, except for the ass-kissers and the ones that will snitch and be a puppet for the UAW and the company. So it’s not just the temps, they do this to everybody.”

The exploitation of temporary workers has been a central factor in the enormous profits and rising share values of the Detroit-based automakers. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Saturday that increased “labor flexibility” has allowed the Detroit Three to pull in record profits even though they continue to lose market share—now below 44 percent—to international competitors.

“The strategy is workable only because the domestic auto makers addressed financial problems that had been a thorn for decades leading to the industry’s collapse in the financial crisis. Even in 2007, when Detroit built more than half the vehicles sold in a sizzling US car market, domestic players were losing approximately \$326 per car produced.

“Fast forward a decade, and GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler earned \$20 billion in North American profits through nine months of 2017, equivalent to \$2,500 for every car made in the region during the period. A broad shift to bulky pickups and SUVs has padded margins, with Ford’s best-selling F-Series selling for \$47,100 in November, \$3,800 higher than a year earlier and far more than it costs to build a truck designed to haul boats or carry lumber,” the *Journal* gushed.

“Detroit’s car companies have worked for several years to break the boom-and-bust business cycle that returned big profits during good years but led to deep losses when demand dried up. Wall Street appears to believe domestic brands have turned a corner, even if their grip on a softening market is

loosening. Shares of GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler have collectively gained 29% of their value in 2017, a year when overall auto sales are slumping modestly and spending on sales incentives has skyrocketed.”

Breaking the “boom and bust” cycle depended entirely on the deep concessions imposed by the UAW since 2007, and in particular during the Obama administration’s 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler. During this period, the UAW imposed the hated two-tier wage system, abolished the eight-hour day, and agreed to a vast expansion of temporary laborers. In exchange, the UAW was handed control of a multi-billion dollar retiree health care trust, along with secret payments funneled through joint labor management “training” centers, as revealed in the bribery indictment involving the late UAW Chrysler Vice President General Holiefield.

The automakers reduced production of low-margin compact cars and sedans—now largely made in Mexico and other lower wage countries—while concentrating on highly profitable sports utility vehicles and pickup trucks. As demand falls, essentially disposable temps have been thrown out of the plants with few if any of the costs associated with laying off older, full time workers. At the same time, the older “legacy” workers are being pushed out the door with speed up and early retirement packages only to be replaced with lower paid second- and third-tier workers and temps.

In October 2015, the UAW concealed its agreement to double the percentage of temporary workers, from 4 percent of the hours worked to 8 percent. Temps who traditionally filled in during vacations and holidays and worked on Mondays, Fridays and weekends, would now be used 365 days a year. This has enabled GM to actually cut labor costs, for Ford to limit its increases to below the rate of inflation and for FCA, which previously enjoyed the lowest labor costs, to see only a marginal rise.

These are the conditions that led to the tragic death of Coby Hennings. To expose the truth and mobilize full-time and part-time workers in a common fight to abolish all tiers, transform part-timers into full-time positions, with full pay and benefits, and restore the principle of equal pay for equal work, rank-and-file workers must take the initiative. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* calls for the formation of rank-and-file factory committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and based on the methods of the class struggle, to take up the elemental responsibility to represent and defend workers, a task that the UAW long ago abandoned.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact